

**“The Dream is Not Complete”
Remarks of Jim Rex
State Superintendent of Education
City of Columbia Martin Luther King Day Celebration
Monday, January 21, 2008**

I want to keep my message to you brief, but today, as we celebrate the life of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, I believe there are some things we must say...some things we must acknowledge...and some things we must commit to do to keep Dr. King’s dream alive.

Yes, we have come a long way.

We have come a long way since Rosa Parks sat down and stood up for all of us. We have come a long way since President Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act. And we have come a long way since Dr. King outlined his dream so eloquently.

But friends, the dream is not complete.

When more than half our schools have at least 70 percent of their students living in poverty, the dream is not complete.

When one in every five schools has an enrollment with more than 90 percent of the students in poverty, the dream is not complete.

When more than 50 percent of our high school students don’t graduate on time...or don’t graduate at all...the dream is not complete.

When we send our children to schools along the Corridor of Shame with holes in the walls, leaking roofs, broken toilets, and other Third-World-like conditions, the dream is not complete.

And when we as a state do not guarantee equitable and adequate funding for all of our students...whether they’re urban or rural, rich or poor, black or white, the dream is not complete.

When I ran for State Superintendent of Education in 2006, a lot of people thought I was crazy. They said, “You’ve never run for office before. You can’t raise the money you need to win. You’re a Democrat. You can’t get elected.”

But I did get elected. We proved all the doubters wrong, and we did what many thought couldn’t be done.

And we’re still doing what they say can’t be done.

We're rejecting vouchers, tax credits, and other schemes that would take money from our public schools and give it to private schools with no accountability for results and no guarantee of accessibility for all students.

And let me say something else about that.

There's been a lot of speculation that the voucher message might be appealing to the African-American community, and I can understand why.

That's because when you look at who's being left behind in this state at an alarming rate, it's our African-American children.

If you look along the Corridor of Shame at who's attending these broken down schools, it's our African-American children.

If you look at the achievement gap and you look at which students are learning and which ones are being left behind, it's our African-American children.

And if you look at who's getting suspended and expelled...if you look at who's being disproportionately put in our special needs classes...if you look at who's ending up in our state's prisons...it's our African-American children.

But vouchers and tax credits are not the answer...they are a fantasy.

The people pushing this agenda don't care about our students. They are wealthy, out-of-state special interest groups that have pumped millions of dollars into our state trying to sabotage the work we're doing and dupe us into following them into a social experiment that is unfair, unproven, unaccountable and unaffordable.

The good news is, there is an alternative. I am a big supporter of charter schools, and we have a law in South Carolina that allows parents, communities....even churches...to say, "We think we can do this better." I say, it's time to loosen the purse strings, stop playing politics, get off our high horse, and get behind those efforts.

Because the truth is, we can do everything these voucher supporters want to do, but we can do it INSIDE our public school system. And we can do it in a way that does not send money to private schools and keeps our schools accountable for results and accessible to all families. What they want to do is Robin Hood in reverse. They want to take from the poor and give to the rich. That's not what we should be doing.

That's why I have co-authored legislation that's at the State House right now to increase choices for parents and students WITHIN the state's public school system. I hope you'll support it.

Friends, we are also going to do something about all this testing in South Carolina. Tests should be tools that help teachers. They shouldn't be dominating the lives of teachers, parents, and students. I have sent a bill over to the State House that would end the PACT test as we know it. It would create a new system that would reduce testing time by about 40 percent and would give our teachers the information they need to help students improve. I hope you'll support it.

And finally, we are doing something about this outdated system of inadequate and inequitable funding that has kept our state from moving forward for generations.

I want to go back to Dr. King for a moment. Because it was exactly a year to the day before his life was taken in Memphis that he spoke from the pulpit of the Riverside Church in New York City. That day he said something that has stuck with me.

He said, "Silence is betrayal."

It's not enough to feel empathy for the children of this state living in poverty, going to underfunded, outdated, and ineffective schools.

It's not acceptable to go about our daily lives, knowing about these conditions and doing nothing about it.

Dr. King said that in the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends.

If you're not speaking out...if you are not calling your legislators, your other elected officials, your governor...if you are not standing on the mountain top, yelling at the top of your voice to correct these injustices...if you're not doing those things, it's the same as supporting them.

By being silent, you are betraying tens of thousands of children. You are betraying their families and their communities. And you are betraying the future of our state.

Dr. King also said that there is such a thing as being too late. Procrastination is a thief, and when it comes to our children, we've procrastinated too long. In his words: "We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now."

Educator Regenia Rawlinson talks about the mindset of poverty in one her books. Because of where they live, where they go to school, because of their backgrounds and experiences, too many of our young people are conditioned to expect and accept too little. Most of the time they have had to settle for second best, so that "second-rate attitude" affects everything that they even attempt.

We have a responsibility – and a chance – to change things. We have a responsibility to help expand their options by giving them access to first-rate facilities and opportunities, and to teachers with high expectations who hold them accountable, set high standards, and help them achieve.

The time is now to stand up, speak out, and be counted. We have waited in the wings for too long for someone else to fix this problem. But the thing is, this isn't someone else's problem. It's *our* problem. And we must fix it.

I am so proud to have had this opportunity to speak with you on this day of honor and reflection. I believe that we have the potential to change course and make South Carolina the envy of the nation when it comes to our public schools. And I think we have the potential to turn around the generations of apathy and neglect that have left so many of our students, schools, and communities behind.

But I can't do it by myself. And if you're waiting for just the right person to get elected and fix all these problems, you're going to be waiting for a long time. It's not going to happen. No one can do this by themselves. I need your help.

Together, we CAN complete the dream.

Thank you for allowing me to be with you today. May God bless each of you, and may God continue to bless South Carolina.